

Death Anxiety, Eternal Life, and the “Trip Treatment”



When I became a Christian, I was quoted every biblical text that assured me if I believed in Jesus as Christ I would gain eternal life. The criteria as to whether I had truly accepted Jesus as Lord and Saviour was whether I knew that I was going to live forever.

Whoever eats of this bread will live forever (John 6:51).

I thought this somewhat bizarre, and while I affirmed it as a belief at the time, I certainly didn't have the first hand experience of it.

I've always thought that this was one of the primary draws of the evangelical message—the promise of eternal life. Turns out that I'm not wrong. We humans are unique in our propensity to suffer from “death anxiety”. Ernest Becker, an anthropologist and Pulitzer Prize winner for his book *The Denial of Death*, theorized that civilizations and their cultures were grand, heroic, but ultimately unsuccessful, attempts to deny death's ultimacy.

The problem of heroics is the central one of human life, that it goes deeper into human nature than anything else because it is based on organismic narcissism and on the child's need for self-esteem as the condition for his life. Society itself is a codified hero system, which means that society

everywhere is a living myth of the significance of human life, a defiant creation of meaning... (where there is none)

Progressive Christians dismiss the evangelical pitch as manipulative fear-mongering. And yet, the witness of scripture does seem to indicate that Jesus survived death—at least his “spiritual body” as Paul puts it. Further, the church has historically confessed that a presence known as “the Christ” was living Jesus. This was the presence of an eternal being living a mortal man, or an infinite being living in and through a finite being.

When Jesus is portrayed by the author of John’s gospel as being “the bread of life” who came down from heaven and that whoever comes to him will never be hungry or thirsty (that is, they will have transcended mortality, along with the fear of death) we just do not know what to do with it as postmodern, “progressive” Christians. But what if that is how the early church experienced the presence of Christ in the eucharist? To partake of the bread was to feel the eternal dimension of one’s soul.



It called to mind the work that was done in the 60’s and early 70’s with entheogens—hallucinogenic substances like psilocybin (mushrooms), LSD, and MDMA, which effect in most cases a profound state of mystical consciousness. There is today a resurgence of research being done on the effective use of these substances therapeutically for depression, addiction, trauma, and, more to the point for this post, on death anxiety. It turns out that these substances are more effective, by far, than psychotherapy on its own. People lose their fear of death.

One of the most famous experiments involved giving twelve theology students mushrooms before attending an Easter service. Here's an [excerpt from a New Yorker article](#) (which is also a great background piece for the state of research on entheogens). It tracks the experience of a man who was diagnosed with terminal cancer, and after his experience in a clinical trial with mushrooms lost his fear of death, went into remission, and also lost his fear of cancer returning. He lost his fear because he understood that death, including his own, was a small part of a much larger, eternal process.

Perhaps the most influential and rigorous of these early studies was the Good Friday experiment, conducted in 1962 by Walter Pahnke, a psychiatrist and minister working on a Ph.D. dissertation under Leary at Harvard. In a double-blind experiment, twenty divinity students received a capsule of white powder right before a Good Friday service at Marsh Chapel, on the Boston University campus; ten contained psilocybin, ten an active placebo (nicotinic acid). Eight of the ten students receiving psilocybin reported a mystical experience, while only one in the control group experienced a feeling of "sacredness" and a "sense of peace." (Telling the subjects apart was not difficult, rendering the double-blind a somewhat hollow conceit: those on the placebo sat sedately in their pews while the others lay down or wandered around the chapel, muttering things like "God is everywhere" and "Oh, the glory!") Pahnke concluded that the experiences of eight who received the psilocybin were "indistinguishable from, if not identical with," the classic mystical experiences reported in the literature by William James, Walter Stace, and others.

I wonder if in an age prior to modernity, when the vast scope of Reality was reduced to the physical realm (as mind-boggling and awesome as the physical realm is), people would take the bread of the Eucharist and tap into the eternal. My Anglican friends tell me that this is why they prefer the high liturgy

of the mass in Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican church to the liberal Protestant version which conveys a very low Christology. Somehow conventional reality is pierced to reveal the mystical, eternal depths of the Christ.

I also wonder if our over-emphasis on the rational in the liberal Protestantism wouldn't be helped by spiking the eucharistic bread with just a little psilocybin—a little bread from heaven. I think contemporary Protestantism has missed the boat in relinquishing the message of eternal life.

What do you think?

John 6:35, 41-51

6:35 Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

6:41 Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven."

6:42 They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?"

6:43 Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves.

6:44 No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day.

6:45 It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.

6:46 Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father.

6:47 Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life.

6:48 I am the bread of life.

6:49 Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died.

6:50 This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.

6:51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

4:25 So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.

4:26 Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger,

4:27 and do not make room for the devil.

4:28 Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy.

4:29 Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.

4:30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption.

4:31 Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice,

4:32 and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

5:1 Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children,

5:2 and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.